

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

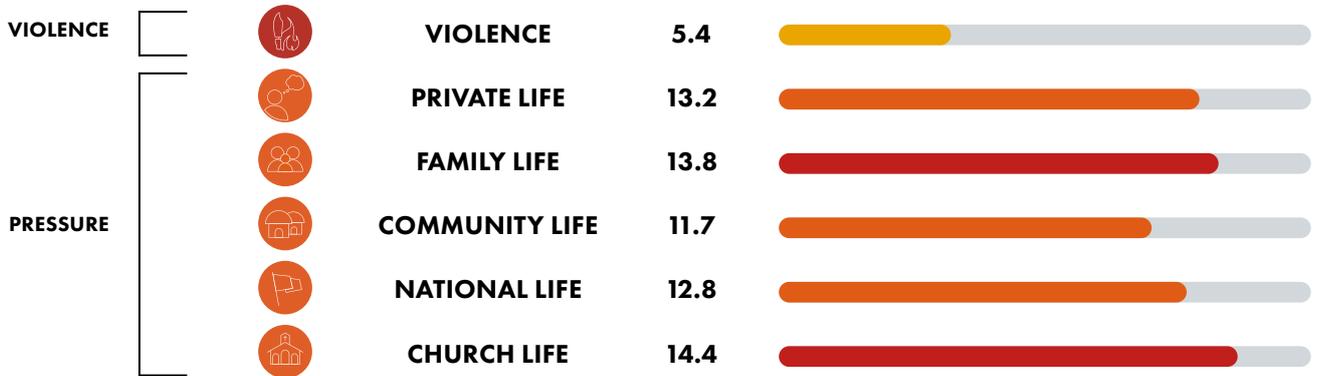
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

MOROCCO

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
24



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

A recurring problem for Christians who are open about their faith relates to Article 220 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which criminalizes “shaking the faith of a Muslim”. This means many Christians who discuss their faith with others are at risk of arrest and criminal prosecution. Advocates for the rights of Christians have also been targeted by the government and Islamic fundamentalists. While the law only punishes proselytization, converts to Christianity can be punished in other ways, for instance by losing inheritance rights and custody of children.

Quick facts

LEADER

King Mohammed VI

POPULATION

38,194,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

31,200¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Constitutional Monarchy



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	31,200	0.1
Muslims	38,073,000	99.7
Agnostics	49,200	0.1
Bahais	37,900	0.1

Source²

Morocco gained independence from France in 1956. Since then, the country has maintained relative stability and prosperity. In 2011, the Arab Spring reached Morocco. Large numbers of protesters were frustrated by unemployment and sought more civil liberties. The government organized a referendum on constitutional reforms which allowed the country to avoid the political upheaval that engulfed much of the rest of the Arab world. However, grievances and discontent remain especially strong in the Rif region (in the northern part of the country) where the mainly ethnic Berber population feel marginalized and neglected by the government.

Islam is the official state religion and 99% of the population is (mostly Sunni) Muslim. Historically large communities of Jews and Christians have declined significantly since the mid-20th century.

According to Middle East Concern, conversion from Islam to Christianity is not prohibited, but “legal provisions strictly prohibit blasphemy and defamation

of religions” as well as non-Islamic proselytism.

According to the Penal Code, anyone who attempts to prevent persons from the exercise of their religious beliefs, and anyone who offers incitements in order to ‘shake the faith of a Muslim’ or to convert a Muslim to another religion faces imprisonment and a fine. The Associations Law prohibits any association that seeks to undermine Islam, and the distribution of non-Islamic materials is restricted...Women registered as Muslim are not permitted to marry non-Muslims”.

The majority of Christians in Morocco are expatriate Roman Catholics. Recognized churches for expatriates exist only in major cities. Indigenous Moroccan Christians are not allowed to join these congregations.

Moroccan Christians, almost all from a Muslim background, face social harassment such as discrimination in the job market, if their conversion becomes known. They are not recognized by the government, are closely monitored by the security services, and most often face hostility from their (extended) family and society.

Christians in Morocco, especially converts from a Muslim background, are careful in their social media postings. Criticizing Islam or the (religious authority of the) king can lead to arrest and detention, as well as social hatred. Most Christians in Morocco use a pseudonym to post Christian material. On the positive side, with the rise of Internet access and social media, many converts to Christianity can now find fellowship online, despite being geographically isolated.

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

How the situation varies by region

The Islamic population in rural areas is known to be conservative; most violations take place in the predominately Berber-populated north-east of the country, the Atlas Mountains and the south-eastern desert area. Most converts live in urban areas, where it is easier to escape family and community pressure.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians are often under surveillance and risk deportation if they are perceived to engage in acts of evangelism. However, they enjoy relative freedom. Expatriate Christians from sub-Saharan Africa, typically Pentecostal, are usually marginalized and discriminated against.

Historical Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background meet in house churches because they cannot get permission to congregate in official churches. Converts face pressure from family and society to renounce their faith, though the level of tolerance is higher in urban areas. They tend to be monitored and risk violations if they engage in evangelism.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression

Morocco displays a more moderate version of Islamic oppression compared to other countries in the region. Restrictions imposed by the Islamic authorities include the confiscation of Christian literature in Arabic (including Bibles) if discovered, bans on cooperating with Christians from abroad, especially if evangelization is planned, and serious challenges in securing recognized places of worship for Christians with a Muslim background. Converts from Islam face pressure from family and community on account of their new faith.

Dictatorial paranoia

The Moroccan government views the church, especially activities involving converts, with suspicion. Moroccans are expected to be loyal to Islam, the king and country. In the past, the authorities have accused Christians of being disloyal to the king and have deported many foreign Christians without due process. One of the reasons for this sort of government action could be the fear of radical Muslim groups; by appeasing them, the government tries to prevent any unrest.



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How are men and women differently affected?

Women

Cultural expectations bind women to domestic duties, especially in rural areas. Converts from Islam are most vulnerable to persecution, particularly in the domestic sphere. They risk arbitrary divorces, denied access to children, domestic confinement and forced marriage. Gaining access to Christian religious materials is extremely difficult, and rural Christians must adhere to religious clothing and rites. Rape and sexual harassment is a taboo area associated with family honor, making it a powerful tool for religious coercion, which is also used against sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

Men

Christian converts are among the most vulnerable in Moroccan society, perceived as having brought shame upon their families. Domestically, family ostracization, denied financial support and inheritance, and abandonment by his wife are likely. If single, there may be pressure to marry a Muslim, though this affects women more. Publicly, men may be interrogated, beaten or imprisoned. The severity of backlash after conversion depends on his social position and political standing. Employment pressure is key, as men are usually the main family providers. Occasionally, discrimination in the education setting also occurs.

Male typical pressure points:

- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	24	71
2023	29	69
2022	27	69
2021	27	67
2020	26	66

The rise in score is due to increases both in pressure (in the family and community Spheres of Life) and in violence, which rose from 4.8 points in WWL 2023 to 5.4 points. Moroccan Christians with a Muslim background continue to face discrimination and marginalization. They are not recognized by the government, are closely monitored by the security services and most often face hostility from (extended) family and society. Their growing number increasingly lead to more incidents.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Several house churches of Moroccan Christians were forced to stop meeting by the police.
- Several Moroccan Christians were publicly arrested and subsequently questioned about their activities by the police. Although no Christian has been prosecuted, these public arrests have a chilling effect, stigmatizing Moroccan Christians both in front of their families and communities.
- Several Moroccan Christians, mostly young women, were forcefully relocated, isolated and/or pressured to marry against their will.
- Numerous other Moroccan Christians have been mentally or physically abused, with several being expelled from their communities and forced to relocate, mostly by family members.
- Several non-Moroccan Christians have been banned from the country or were not allowed to enter, because they allegedly were involved in proselytizing.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians internally displaced	Christians forced to marry	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed
2024	13	13	3	3
2023	21	27	5	2

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

Private life

It is risky for both local and expatriate Christians to speak about their faith publicly with those outside their immediate family. Doing so carries the risk of being charged with “shaking the faith of a Muslim” under Moroccan law. Community members can sometimes react violently when seeing a convert display a Christian symbol or discuss their faith, and many converts are afraid to share their new faith.

Family life

Intermarriage between Muslim women and Christian men is prohibited by law. Children of Christians are likely to face discrimination and harassment from peers, as well as isolation from the wider community. Pressure is intentionally placed upon Moroccan Christian families in an effort to force either assimilation or emigration.

Community life

With the Taliban take-over, this pressure has grown. Christianity is seen as standing outside the traditional Moroccan identity. Additionally, it is stigmatized as the faith of imperialists. On this justification, Moroccan security services monitor local and expatriate Christians’ activities. They also prohibit the organization of any groups who identify as overtly “Christian” for fear of

evangelism. For Christians with a Muslim background, societal pressure also makes it difficult to raise their children as Christians. Such pressure could, for instance, take the form of bullying at school or Islamic instruction without parental consent.

National life

Politically, the situation for Christians in Morocco is difficult, as the Constitution declares Islam to be the state religion. Civil society organizations with clear Christian convictions, or which aim to defend the rights of Moroccan converts, are actively opposed by the government. Christian evangelism is banned, and those who engage in it could be accused of “shaking the faith of Muslims” and risk criminal liability.

Church life

The fact that Christian activities may be construed as proselytization often hampers the ability of Christian communities to grow and thrive. Expatriate churches are consistently monitored to ensure that Moroccan nationals do not attend their services. The state prohibits Moroccan Christians from establishing their own churches. This effort is supported by the fact that the government refuses to permit the display or sale of Bibles which they believe are intended for use in proselytizing.

International obligations & rights violated

Morocco has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Morocco is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian converts are ostracized and faced with opposition by their families, and threatened with divorce and loss of child custody (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Women converts are forcibly married and forced to recant their beliefs. (ICCPR Art. 23.3 and CEDAW Art. 16).
- Christians face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christians face restrictions in employment in the public sector and experience discrimination in the private sector (ICCPR Arts. 25 and 26, and ICESCR Art. 6)



Situation of other religious minorities

Judaism is the only minority religion officially recognized in the Constitution, and Jews have their own religious courts for family matters. Although Islam is the official religion of the state, de facto only Sunni (Maliki) Islam is socially acceptable. Shia Muslims, Ahmadiyya Muslims and Bahais face government restrictions that make it nearly impossible for them to openly practice their faith. Atheists and atheism are suppressed by both society and the government. Several known atheists and other citizens have received death threats and were harassed by the government in the recent past.

Open Doors in Morocco

Open Doors raises prayer support for believers.



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
